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Jörg Volbers*

Language or Experience? – That's not the Question: A Case for Reflexivity

Abstract: Analytic philosophy of language has often criticized classical pragmatism for holding to an unwarranted notion of experience which lapses into epistemological foundationalism; defenders of the classics have denied such a consequence. The paper tries to move this debate forward by pointing out that the criticism of the empiricist “given” is not wedded to a specific philosophical method, be it linguistic or pragmatist. From a broader historical perspective drawing in particular on Kant, antifoundationalism turns out to be deeply rooted in modern western philosophy and its ambivalent attitude towards the success of the empirical sciences. This diagnosis allows to reassess classical pragmatism beyond the perceived alternative “language vs. experience”, and to concentrate on antifoundationalism as the real challenge to any modern, epistemologically oriented philosophy. In that perspective, classical pragmatism’s genuine contribution is to do justice to antifoundationalism by focusing on the experimental dynamic of scientific practice, which is most commonly ignored by the analytic tradition. Pragmatism identifies rationality with the practical operation of reflexively determining and articulating what is being experienced. With this approach, it is argued, experiential pragmatism serves modern antifoundationalism ends better than its analytic siblings.

The Antifoundationalist Challenge

Any contemporary discussion of pragmatism which turns to it for more than historical reasons is faced with a challenge: How should it deal with the troubling issue of experience? In the light of the rise and success of analytic philosophy of language, the classical pragmatist’s recourse to a rather strong notion of “experience” is on the defensive. The classical figures of that tradition, namely Peirce, James and Dewey, put a lot of explanatory weight on the fact that human beings are experiencing beings. “Experience”, in their view, is not just empirical access to the world granted to a being which is, in its essence, rational and linguistic. For them, experience is the essential form of human interaction. The experiential “flow” (as James tends to see it) or “activity” (as Dewey puts it) permeates, and thus forms, the more intellectual and cognitive dimensions even where – as in logic – the mind seems to be withdrawn from all forms of “empirical” contact. Peirce’s semiotic categories of immediate “firstness”, reactive “secondness” and normative “thirdness” and Dewey’s distinction between experiences had or known are attempts to capture such a sense of an inescapable direct human exposure, dependency and involvement.

From the perspective of analytic linguistic philosophy, though, it is exactly that strong notion of experience – the reliance on experience as source, medium and arbiter of knowledge – which constitutes its weakest part. They see the pragmatist “quest for immediacy” (Bernstein 1966: 92) as a quest to give knowledge a foundation. But such a foundation, it is argued, cannot be had; in particular, it cannot be had

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by reference to “experience”. Such a hope is an empiricist “Myth of the Given”, as Sellars (1997) famously put it: an unsupportable fantasy to construe experience as an immediate access to the world. Instead, we should accept that any experience or experiential content is of necessity linguistically mediated. In the eyes of the analytic tradition of linguistic philosophy, we should investigate that intrinsically linguistic nature of human understanding, since language – and not experience – is the hallmark of human understanding. Consequently, many famous revitalizations of pragmatism (Rorty 1979; Brandom 1994) try to separate the tradition from its strong reliance on “experience” and prefer to reformulate pragmatist insights with the means of linguistic philosophy.

It appears, then, that one must choose between two distinct alternatives: language or experience, “linguistic” or “experiential” pragmatism. But the situation is more complicated than this. The main motive of those linguistic philosophers who criticize the classic pragmatists is to preserve what has been called antifoundationalism. Antifoundationalism is the position that there is no privileged, immediate access to reality (through, e.g., sense-data or raw experience). It rejects in particular the idea that there is a “basic level” of empirical interaction which gives us a glimpse of the world as it is, independently of our concepts and expectations. Basically, it is a renunciation of a dogmatic, straightforward empiricism. I take contemporary antifoundationalism to be the most influential and the most important argument against a strong notion of “experience”.

And yet such an antifoundationalist position is not exclusive to analytic philosophy of language. It is also a constitutive feature of pragmatism itself, and it has been consciously embraced by the classical authors of that tradition. Thus many defenders of classical pragmatism – such as Richard Bernstein (2010) – point out that the attacks in the name of antifoundationalism simply miss the target. Viewing our knowledge as always fallible, precarious and subject to constant reformulation and revision, pragmatism clearly belongs to the list of antifoundationalist thinkers. In fact there can be found such a strong antifoundationalism that, as Bernstein (2010: 152) notes, it can be seen as a “slander” to accuse the classic pragmatists of the opposite.

This observation shifts the problem. It is not as if the classical pragmatists were unaware of the challenge of antifoundationalism and the dangers of dogmatic empiricism. The question is whether they *succeeded* in incorporating that insight into their philosophy. For many interpreters, they eventually failed. The most prominent example for this assessment is Rorty, who claimed that “‘Language’ is a more suitable notion than ‘experience’ for saying the holistic and anti-foundationalist things which James and Dewey had wanted to say” (Rorty 1985: 40; 1991: 53). It may have been the pragmatists’ *intention* to avoid the empiricist given, but thinking and working before the *linguistic turn*, they lacked the tools to consequently avoid the mythical given. Rorty is here in a rather unusual alliance with Cheryl Misak. She argues in her recent book on “American Pragmatism” that pragmatism and logical empiricism “drifted closer and closer” to each other, “until the views were almost indistinguishable” (Misak 2013: 254). Her book tells the story of a general rise of pragmatist thinking in the 20th century which unites pragmatism and analytic antifoundationalist thinkers.

Both narratives seem to heed Bernstein’s reminder that antifoundationalism is a distinguishing mark of classical pragmatism. But they do not establish a perspective in which both sides – linguistic and experiential pragmatism – can be assessed on their own merits. They measure the classics against the achievements of modern analytical philosophy, and judge them consequently to either be a *part* of it, or to have tried at least to be so. Such approaches abandon the idea that there is any *distinctive* point in classical pragmatism’s insistence on “experience”.

This approach is a significant problem not only for those who wish to defend that classical orientation. In presupposing the post-analytic take on “experience”, it also blocks discussions of possible shortcomings of this view. Moreover, it does not allow us to see what is really at issue here, which is the philosophical significance of antifoundationalism itself. If indeed the suggestion that both the philosophy of language and classical pragmatism are antifoundational is correct, we then need to ask what the common problem is to which they both respond. Neither tradition is just “standing there” in history. Rather, each articulates and answers questions posed by the tradition they inherit and the historical space they occupy.

What are those questions? We will see that *antifoundationalism* is more than just a criticism of certain empiricist aspirations. This concept (and the sort of criticism it invites) is actually assimilating a host of problems and topics which are typical for modernity, that is, for philosophy since Bacon and Descartes. So the first necessary step is to situate the debates of the 20th century in a wider frame. If we want to look for the beginnings of the widespread philosophical criticism of foundationalism, we must go back to Kant and his “Copernican revolution”. Kant was trying to save empiricism from Hume’s skeptical interpretation, and he became the canonical reference for the idea that there is no such thing as an immediate contact with the world – as Kant puts it, every experience is the product of the synthesizing activities of the mind. It is no surprise, then, that antifoundationalist philosophy of language was repeatedly engaged with Kant and the post-Kantian heritage. And it is, of course Hegel, this “great foe of immediacy” (Sellars), who is the best known and most discussed antifoundationalist.

Here we can find a suitable starting point to develop a broader understanding of *antifoundationalism*. If we see it as a part of Kant’s complicated heritage, we are equipped with a point of reference shared by both classical pragmatism and contemporary philosophy of language. Kantian philosophy is not only central to the tradition of Logical Empiricism, against which post-analytic philosophy of language revolted. (Friedman 1999) Authors such as Sellars, McDowell and Brandom also articulate their position in close confrontation with Kant and Hegel; there is even talk of a “return of Hegelian thought” (Redding 2007; Bernstein 2010: 89-105).

Pragmatism, in turn, is firmly rooted in American *and* continental thinking. Idealism was one of the dominating schools in British and American philosophy towards the end of the 19th century; it left visible traces in the classical pragmatist’s writings. Dewey describes his own trajectory as a transition from “absolutism to experimentalism”, explicitly expressing his own debts to Hegel’s philosophy; Peirce takes his thinking as a critical correction of Hegelian approaches. James entertained

a much more ambiguous relationship to idealism’s heritage¹. But even his case shows that pragmatism and philosophy of language can claim a shared point of departure.

The point, then, of the following reflections is to draw the consequences of that common heritage. We should *rid* antifoundationalism of any constitutive reference to a specific method or medium, be it “language”, “consciousness” or “experience”. There are many ways to be an antifoundationalist. We would do better not to take antifoundationalism to be a clear-cut doctrine. Rather, it should be seen as tied to a specific *modern* outlook on thinking and reflexivity. Once we have broadened our perspective in this way, we will be better able to judge and to discuss the potential strengths and weaknesses of experiential pragmatism on its own – as one articulation of modern *antifoundationalism* among others.

One central aim of this paper is to establish such a perspective. To that end, the following text begins (Sec. 2) by expounding what will be called the “received view”. According to that view, most prominently defended by Richard Rorty, analytical post-empiricist philosophy of language represents antifoundationalism in its best and purest form. This position is backed by a historical narrative which depicts antifoundationalism as the result of a radical criticism of its empiricist predecessors, notably the Logical Empiricism of the Vienna Circle. I will argue that this position is historically inaccurate (Sec. 3); there are more ties between post-empiricist linguistic philosophy and Logical Empiricism than the received view suggests. Most notably, the modern empiricists *also* shared a general antifoundational perspective on science and rationality, a radical “ideal of intellectual flexibility as a mark of science and rationality” (Godfrey-Smith 2003: 30). Given these commonalities, I will argue (Sec. 4) that *antifoundationalism* is better seen as a distinctive modern understanding of science and rationality, most influentially defended by Kant and post-Kantian philosophies, and thus not specifically tied to philosophy of language.

From that perspective, then, the conflict between “language and experience” appears to be of limited value. The more important subject, it is argued (Sec. 5), is how to keep the delicate balance between what will turn out to be the two constitutive orientations of antifoundationalism: a general *affirmation of science as a commendable way to gain knowledge*, on the one hand, and an insistence on the standing possibility of critical reflection. Here it emerges that it is “reflexivity” which forms the core of modern antifoundationalism.

The remaining sections argue that even though “language vs. experience” is the wrong question, the classical pragmatists’ strong notion of “experience” is of great value for such an articulation of critical reflexivity. Classical pragmatism is a reconstruction of experience, and an experientially driven reflection on the model of the *experiment* (Sec. 6). It thus articulates an understanding of rationality and criticism which keeps distance from a positivist reduction of thinking and yet provides itself with the means to learn and profit from the rise of modern science. Central to this position, it is argued, is the acceptance of the idea that *experience itself* drives forward

1. Cf. Bernstein (2010: 93-95) for a cautious appraisal of James. One of Pierce’s numerous references to Hegel is that “in the long wandering of his *Encyclopedia* he has been a little warmed by truth” (1998: 143).

the development of rationality and reason, as it is exemplified in the case of the experiment.

1. *The Received View*

The first step, then, is to unsettle the conviction that any decent antifoundationalism has to take a linguistic form. It is this assumption that puts experiential pragmatism and modern analytic philosophy of language at odds with one another. Rorty (1979, 1982, and 1991) is probably most responsible for disseminating that view. According to his influential narrative, early analytic philosophy’s turn to language (as in the works of Frege) “was a rather desperate attempt to keep philosophy an armchair discipline” (Rorty 1991: 50). It tried to create a transcendental refuge from the empirical sciences which began, in the 19th century, to encroach on formerly venerable philosophic topics, most notably on the study of the mind. The dialectical point here is that in refining that “armchair-philosophy”, more and more problems were uncovered. According to the received view, philosophers of language came finally (after World War II) to see that the very idea of separating “experience” from linguistic understanding was wrong from the start. Authors like Sellars, Quine and Davidson (with the support of pragmatism and the later Wittgenstein) turned away from the originally rigid distinction between analytical reflection and empirical content and established the holistic, antifoundationalist philosophy of language which Rorty himself endorsed. Analytic philosophy turned to what has been dubbed “post-analytic”² or “post-positivistic” philosophy, an approach which sees no need for a philosophical reflection on “experience”.

The received view is, of course, not wrong in any obvious sense. If we want to see how it fails, we have to highlight the points that make it so convincing, and then try to see them from another perspective. The first correct historical point to note is that the story centers on a problem which is of special interest for us: analytic philosophy begins as a *problematization* of experience. The analytical move towards linguistic logic, inaugurated by Frege, was itself a reaction to an overly empiricist stance towards thinking. The catchword here is “anti-psychologism”. In Frege’s eyes, among others, 19th century positivism went too far. It declared that even the laws of thinking were individual and should become an object of empirical psychological studies, thus translating John Stuart Mill’s psychologist understanding of logic as forms of “mental association” into an empirical research program³. Against this all-encompassing empiricism, Frege defended a basically Kantian vision of the necessity

2. The term “post-analytic” wrongly suggests a decisive, revolutionary anti-empiricist turn within analytic philosophy. As Michael Beany (2013: 28) points out, this view over-dramatizes the events. I’ll stick to the label, though, where it helps to distinguish “analytic philosophy after World War II” from the earlier tradition.

3. “The linguistic turn...became necessary because, in the course of the nineteenth century, evolutionary biology and empirical psychology had begun to naturalize the notions of ‘mind’, ‘consciousness’, and ‘experience’” (Rorty 1991: 53). Ryle (in Ayer 1956: 6) and Beany (2013: 33-34) point out that authors as different as Bradley, Husserl, and Brentano shared analytic philosophy’s critical attitude towards psychologism and the naturalization of the mind.

of objective, *a priori* rules of logic. Logic cannot be reduced to psychological laws if we want to retain the distinction between our objective knowledge of things and mere subjective belief. Without the common ground of objectively shared logical laws, Frege contends, there could not even be the *possibility* of a rational dispute (Frege 1962: xix). In consequence, we must assume the validity of logic over against the turmoil of empirical studies. In that way, philosophy of language established a realm *a priori* against which empirical sciences were supposed to have no leverage.

One founding impulse of analytic philosophy thus was the attempt to establish itself against excessive empiricism. Consequently, the task of accounting for our experiential contact with the world constituted a permanent challenge for analytical thinking⁴. In admitting to logic this superior, ahistorical role, it became difficult to see how to describe the relationship between *logical* (i.e. inferential or “syntactical”) relations and world-disclosing empirical evidence. A parallel problem haunted linguistic philosophy in general at this time. In the first third of the 20th century, structuralist theories (i.e. early Wittgenstein, Schlick, Hilbert, de Saussure) were trying to explain meaning in purely formal terms, thus repeating the general neo-Kantian move towards the *a priori*. In the course of attempts to clarify the empirical “contact” of this formal structure and the world, the domain of the former began to shrink. It is one common mark of post-analytic philosophy that it assigns human practice a constitutive role for the development, and thus logic, of our understanding. The formalist understanding of practice as “mere use” gave way to an acknowledgment of the irreducible interdependence of form and *praxis* (Bertram 2008). Thus, analytical empiricism set out on a quest which, as Bernstein nicely summarizes, had “begun with an obsession with the meaning and reference of single terms [and then] moved to the search for a rigorous criterion for discriminating empirically meaningful sentences or propositions, [before it] shifted to the evaluation of competing conceptual schemes, and finally turned to the realization that science must be a historically dynamic process” (Bernstein 1983: 173).

What we have here, in fact, is a continuous *criticism of experience*, which is paradigmatically represented within analytic philosophy of language by the works of Quine, Sellars and Davidson. They put an end to any philosophical aspirations to isolate a distinct logical *a priori*. Quine destroyed the distinction between analytic and synthetic; Davidson the still lingering “very idea of a conceptual scheme”; and Sellars joined Quine’s anti-reductionist criticism with his attack on the “Myth of the Given”. All of this amounted to a full rejection of empiricism: there are no isolated analytic truths which could be firmly set against experience; there is no single, individual evidence which can authoritatively confirm or falsify empirical claims; and there is even no conceptual “framework” which bestows incommensurable forms on experience.

Given this development, it is no surprise that Rorty perceived classical pragmatism’s strong notion of experience as a hopeless anachronism. Once freed from the early analytics’ *a priori*, language can serve the same philosophical goals as the

4. Another force driving the transformation of analytic philosophy was the *internal* criticism to the logicist foundationalist program launched by Frege and Russell, which tried to present mathematics as a pure articulation of logic.

classical notion of experience. And it can even serve them better. Experience seems to be fleeting and unstable, it is hard to describe, and it is burdened with theoretical difficulties about consciousness and mental representation. Conversely, a linguistic token is always ready to hand for further inferences. Once we give up the idea that linguistic meaning represents some given “inner” intentional states, meaning becomes *objectively* accessible. There might be diverging perspectives, but meaningful language – very much like logic in Frege’s sense – always transcends our private consciousness. It can be looked at over and over again, and it is thus always at the disposal for criticism and reflection.

2. *Revising the Received View*

The main problem of the received view is that it tacitly accepts the traditional empiricist’s narrow understanding of experience. The narrative is right in stressing that *empiricism* posed one of the major challenges to analytical philosophy, and that this constellation contributed to some of its most distinct accomplishments. But it is wrong in suggesting that there is an internal relation between “foundationalism” – a dogmatic view on thinking, science and critical rationality – and the notion of “experience”. It takes experience *tout court* to be responsible for foundationalism, whereas the real historical target had been “experience” as a technical epistemological term. This narrow perspective is due to the very same historical dynamics which have just been sketched: Logical Empiricism introduced a reduced, purely scientifically oriented understanding of “experience” into analytic philosophy; and this limited thematic focus has not been widened after Logical Positivism’s fall. In consequence, all those forms of experience which were so pivotal for classical pragmatism – artistic experience, ethical feelings, or experiences of doubt – were kept out of the discussion. The one-sided empiricist understanding of experience came to stand for experience in full⁵.

But there is no need to adopt this limited point of view. Support for a wider perspective is provided by the historical dimension of the narrative itself. The post-analytic exclusion of “experience” in favor of “language” has been itself a critical response to a specific historical experience – the rise of positivism and the expansion of empirical research to previously undisturbed regions. In that historical perspective, we can see that “language” and “experience” are elements of the *same* reflexive movement: they are parts of the attempt to come to grips with that newly established “empiricity” of the emerging knowledge practices. Even if “language” is the last word of such a philosophical reflection, it is part of a reasoned recommendation on how we should, in the light of these cultural developments, better understand our relation to the world and to ourselves. In that perspective, “experience” and “language” denote two poles of a *relation*, and the real question turns out to be how to understand that relation.

5. Even John McDowell, who is consciously defending a “minimal empiricism” (McDowell 1996: xi) within the coordinates of an anti-foundationalist philosophy of language, still adheres to the narrow empiricist conception which treats experience as something passive (1996: 10). For a criticism of this particular point, see Peschard 2010.

Taking a second look at the received historical narrative, we can see that such a relational view fits much better the real historical movements of the analytic debate. The primary motive behind empiricism is to explain how our conceptions of the world, our understanding, can be corrected *by the world itself*. Such a conception is not necessarily identical with foundationalism. If foundationalism is the idea that such an empirical point of contact serves as *irrefutable evidence*, we can avoid foundationalism by simply canceling “irrefutable”. In this loose antifoundationalist sense, then, the contested postulate of “epistemic intermediaries” (Davidson 2009a) is better understood as an attempt to give an articulated form to the *world-dependence* of thinking. These attempts might be better or worse; but they are not automatically “mythical”.

Remember that analytic philosophy began with Frege’s task of separating logic from experience. This move, polemically dismissed as “armchair philosophy” by Rorty, can also be understood as an effort to rescue criticism from its positivistic self-destruction. It is a perfectly valid example of reflexively assigning “experience” its due place. Positivism documents the problems we run into if we put *too* much weight on the role of experience in our inquiries. If the only valid knowledge is empirical knowledge, the very idea of knowledge itself is threatened; we create paradoxes⁶. The knowing subject cannot simply step aside and investigate its own presuppositions and cognitive operations. We can’t get out of our skins. Thus, we need a form of explanation that allows for the possibility of continuous empirical research without letting empiricism run wild.

This broadly Kantian motive also inspired Logical Empiricism, the direct predecessor of “post-analytic” philosophy. Since Rorty, the historiography of this earlier analytic philosophy has made considerable advances. Authors like Alan Richardson, Thomas Uebel or Michael Friedman paint the picture of a tradition which did not seek to *found* knowledge in experience, at least not in the pejorative sense: “it is false that all these philosophies rehash traditional foundationalist epistemology” (Uebel 1996: 416)⁷. The project, rather, is to understand how empirical sciences can be so impressively effective, and to defend them as the ultimate model for gaining secure knowledge – an ambition incidentally shared by classical pragmatism⁸. *Part* of that project on the side of Logical Empiricism was to mark the particular (“empirical”) points of contact which explain science’s distinct advantage over competing forms of inquiry. The intention was not to dogmatically restrict our possibilities of knowledge, but rather to allow for the multiplicity of empirical research. The chided “formalism” of Logical Empiricism should be seen as an important ingredient of such a flexible form of empiricism: By reducing logic to a formal relation without any factual content, this philosophy actually tried to consciously *avoid* the projection of philosophical dogmas and unjustified beliefs into the scientific system of testing and validation.

6. These paradoxes, which all result from the attempt to give the operations of the mind a *positive* foundation which is external to the mind itself, are well captured by Foucault, who describes the human being as “doubling” itself, or splitting itself into an empirical and a transcendental part (2012: Chapter 9).

7. An impressive document of that rehabilitation of Logical Empiricism is Richardson and Uebel 2007.

8. Cheryl Misak 2013 draws attention to this overlap.

There is further reason to resist the dismissal of Logical Positivism, or analytical empiricism in general, as a plain foundationalist enterprise. We could call it the “argument by tradition”. Many ideas defended by post-analytical authors can be also found in the writings of their predecessors – simply because the post-analytical arguments critically reflect that tradition. They had not been invented from scratch. Take holism: Quine was not the first to introduce holism in philosophy of science. Neurath and Carnap well knew that empirical testing is dependent on whole “systems” of concepts and theories⁹. The same holds for the criticism of the analytic-synthetic-divide. Quine’s radical demand for empirical testability, which he turned against analytic sentences, was “a standard Viennese stock in trade, and there were numerous variations” (Creath 2007: 340). There’s more Carnap in Quine and Sellars than Rorty’s one-sided historiography would allow.

All of this is not to imply that there had been no progress in the move from Logical Empiricism to post-analytical philosophy. The point here is just to insist on commonalities that are too often ignored. They show that *antifoundationalism* is more an issue than a well-articulated position. There is even an emblem for that issue, a metaphoric description. According to an image originally introduced by Otto Neurath, science and empirical knowledge are like a boat: “We are at sea, and we must repair the boat while we are underway without ever being able to put into dry-dock”. As Terry Pinkard observes at the end of the last century: This image has “become the metaphor of choice” for Anglo American mainstream philosophy. (Pinkard 1999: 191). It appears, for example, in Quine (1970: 3), Davidson (2009b: 169) or McDowell (1996: 81). The image is a perfect expression of the post-analytic antifoundationalist spirit, the point, as McDowell formulates it, “that one can reflect only from the midst of the way of thinking one is reflecting about” (1996: 81). There is no outward haven to which one can retreat and carefully rebuild one’s knowledge from scratch.

And yet the famous image of the boat, so essential for the post-analytic self-understanding, had been introduced by one of the leading members of the Vienna Circle, by Otto Neurath, long before the rise of post-analytic philosophy (1921: 75 ff.; see Uebel 2000). Neurath himself points us even further back to history: He substantiates his antifoundationalism with reference to the conventionalism of Henri Poincaré and Pierre Duhem, philosophers (and practitioners) of science at the end of the 19th century (Neurath 1921: 81). A more contemporary appropriation of that theme, in turn, calls it a genuine “pragmatist thought”, thus adding yet another instance of antifoundationalism: “We must try to explain our practices and concepts, including our epistemic norms and standards, using those very practices, concepts, norms, and standards” (Misak 2013: 252).

Our little survey shows that this thought is indeed at the core of much of modern philosophy; but it is not essentially tied to any philosophical school or doctrine. It seems that Neurath’s *antifoundationalist* idea is neither specifically pragmatist, post-analytic or bound to a strong linguistically oriented type of thinking. It is the expression of something much more general, to which we turn in the next section.

9. Peter Godfrey-Smith (2003: 32) lists references to holistic doctrines in Feigl, Carnap and “even” Ayer.

3. *The Two Pillars of Antifoundationalism*

We have seen that *antifoundationalism* is not exclusively bound to linguistic philosophy. It can also be found in other philosophical flavors, as our little history of analytic philosophy has shown. It is time now to broaden the perspective. If we take modernity to begin with the rise of the empirical sciences, antifoundationalism seems to be a typically *modern* way of thinking: a *reaction* to the impressive performance of modern forms of inquiry. In fact, it turns out to be a philosophical attitude which is tightly tied to the rise of the sciences, though by no means subjecting itself to them.

Antifoundationalism, I want to claim, embodies two modern attitudes which have the tendency to pull in different directions: There is, first, a strong respect and a high esteem for modern science, where “science” is understood as a partially *empirical* form of research going beyond mere mathematical or logical reasoning. Secondly, there is an equally strong appreciation of human reason and its self-critical powers. We can call these the twin values of empirical science and critical rationality. Taken together, they highlight the *revolutionary* force of scientific enlightenment, which demands that even long established and cherished beliefs have to be toppled if, upon empirical inspection, they turn out to be wrong.

On a first glance, there seems to be no problem holding both values at the same time: Isn’t science so powerful *just because* it is rational? Where is the tension? If anything can be called “rational”, it seems, it is science – with its strict logical and empirical demands on thinking. But not to see that there is a tension, I want to claim, is exactly the mistake of the analytic approach to *antifoundationalism*.

Let us begin to articulate the tension by elaborating upon the core ideas behind these twin values. The first one is the conviction that science is *the* paradigmatic form of inquiry. Note that this specific view, even if it is looking obvious to us, already has an historical index. Since Plato, philosophers had always wanted to avoid building our hopes on dreams or idle fantasies. Good knowledge must be well-founded. That’s no news, and it is in no way restricted to philosophy. But the rise of modern science has opened up a new option: in addition to the traditional recourse to eternal, logical or mathematical truths, such a solid justification can now also be sought in experience or empirical evidence.

Such a strong confidence in science is a common article of modern faith. There is a widespread respect for the accomplishments of science in modern philosophy, and numerous thinkers have been inspired to find out what has caused this success, and whether we can transfer it to other forms of inquiry. Thus, we should not only add empiricist and positivist philosophers to the long list of “defenders of experience”. Valid candidates are also, in particular, Kant (who calls experience “the teacher fittingly assigned to us”, CpR B 498¹⁰) and his subsequent critics in the tradition of German Idealism. As Pinkard (1999) reminds us, these thinkers *all* sought to keep philosophical thinking in touch with the sciences.

10. Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason (1998) will be cited as “CpR” with “B” signifying the second original German edition. All page numberings are from that edition.

Kant’s way of seeing the issue expresses the deeper problem at stake here. He gives modern antifoundationalism its distinctive form by laying stress on its second core value, rationality. Even though Kant is convinced that experience is our teacher, he refrains from passing *all* authority to it. To the contrary: His whole philosophy articulates an understanding of criticism and reflection which highlights the ability of reason to critically scrutinize *any* part of itself at any time, thereby establishing a radically self-referential realm. To Kant, the defining aspect of human rationality is its *autonomy*. This understanding of reason – which owes quite a lot to Descartes – furnishes *antifoundationalism* with its decisive motivation: Being rational essentially means to be fully capable of *self-criticism* and *self-reflection*; and thus the idea of a fully self-authorizing epistemic experience would fly in the face of reason. The problem with the given, then, is that it breaks the chain of justifications and thus prevents reflection to come full circle. Another way to articulate that critical insight is that philosophy, and thinking in general, cannot hope to find a fully external justification of its thoughts. *We are always implicated in our own judgments*. This is the point of Kant’s dictum that the “I think” must be able to accompany all my representations¹¹. William James has found his own now-famous expression for that insight: “The trail of the human serpent is thus over everything” (1987: 515).

The most visible expressions of Kant’s strong conception of reason can be found in his practical philosophy. This is no accident: The deeper issue at stake here is human freedom. Kant is convinced that the enlightened mind is capable of freeing itself from any subjection to “external”, heteronomous laws and principles. His ethics firmly opposes the idea that morality might be founded on emotions or intuitive insights (even though it was the same Kant who introduced the idea of a founding *fact* of reason). In religious matters, Kant demanded to accept religion only within the limits set by reason; he accepts the Christian commandments only insofar they comply with the categorical imperative. In political matters, he defended the necessity to think for oneself as the “motto” of the enlightenment: *Sapere aude!*. The enlightened citizen has to free himself from his or her “self-incurred tutelage” A¹². What is necessary for that change is, according to Kant, the competent exercise of one’s own understanding.

Kant’s political motto can be transferred to his theoretical philosophy: Dare to think yourself, and you will be able to finally free yourself from bad, dogmatic metaphysics (which is also “self-incurred”, since reason itself misunderstands its very own possibilities). The most tangible *epistemological* expression of this strong conception of autonomy is Kant’s often-cited statement that concepts and experience are dependent on each other: “Thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind” (CpR: B75)¹³. Here we touch upon the tight connection between Kant’s strong trust in human reason and the *antifoundationalist* criticism of empiricism. Everything “given” (in Sellars’ sense) in experience would *coerce* us

11. Taylor 2013 offers such a reading of Kant’s transcendental deduction.

12. I am referring here to the first sentence of Kant’s answer to the question “What is Enlightenment?” (Kant 1999: 20-28; see Volbers 2011).

13. Kant actually talks about “intuitions” (“Anschauungen”) remaining blind; but this is a technical term adding the specific thesis that experience is always already “formed” in order to be intelligible at all.

into an immutable judgment, and thus undermine and eventually destroy autonomous thinking. We want external friction through empirical evidence and experience; but we also need to guard the critical capacity of reason. The rejection of the empirical given is an integral part of the overall strategy to defend reason’s autonomy.

4. *Antifoundationalism and Transcendental Philosophy*

Kant’s position had a decisive influence on the subsequent course of philosophy. Terry Pinkard (1999) maps out a whole history of modern philosophy, continental *and* analytic, which is centered on the strong understanding of autonomy and rationality defended by German Idealism, and its continuous critique. But the point is not historical. Kant’s strong understanding of autonomy exemplifies an essential problem of modernity: How can and should we understand “reason” in the light of the success of modern, empirical sciences? On the one hand, we want to let ourselves be *corrected* by experience. Yet there is a limit to its authority: we better *also* be wary of its immediate suggestions. This is not criticism for its own sake, but rather a necessary note of caution. Science is not just “picking up” experience’s lessons, as it were. It has to learn how to take them: what to accept and what to decline.

Kant devised an influential strategy to defend the antifoundationalist ideal that we can reflectively correct *all* of our judgments (even if never “all at once”). He tried to demonstrate that *all* experience is always already “infused” with rationality and understanding, thus ready to be accessed through reasoning. This transcendental approach to experience expresses a powerful way to unite the two fundamental premises of *antifoundationalism*: The critical power of reason can be combined with empiricism if we *rationalize* “experience”. Kant’s proposal is to see experience as a series of judgments, and thus to integrate all experience into a complex of categorical and conceptual presumptions. Such a rationalization allows us to confer the power of justification to the “given” experience and yet to leave open the possibility of retrospective criticism. In this way, reason’s autonomy is preserved.

Kant’s insight is that experience has to be left *open* to rationality if we want to retain both antifoundationalist tenets. Experience cannot be an absolutely “alien force”, as McDowell (1996: 8) explains. Illustrations of this general transcendental point can be found in Hegel’s *Phenomenology*. In its opening discussion of sense-certainty we see that the simple gesture of *pointing* cannot alone produce or constitute knowledge, since knowledge – understanding – already assumes a generality which transcends the presently given. It is not by accident that Hegel draws on the idea of ostensive definition to discuss the inherent problems of our hold on experience. That simple gesture is the incarnated promise of empiricism. It suggests that idle quarreling can be cut short by *pointing* to the facts: “don’t you see?”. And yet, this gesture seems to be incapable of determining knowledge. Understanding what is being pointed to already presupposes the general capacity to *recognize* what falls under the concept, something which cannot be provided by the singular bare presence of a thing.

The same point is exploited in Wittgenstein’s so-called private language argument. The idea of a private language is the thought that there might be something

internally “given” to me, independent of any language at all. Obvious candidates for such an internally given are mental representations, intentions, and perceptions. But how, Wittgenstein asks, can we ever *know* that we privately refer to the same “something”? Without language, Wittgenstein argues, we cannot even know whether this “something” is, say, pain, or an impression, or a belief. Lacking the capacity to discriminate effectively, it is even difficult to call it a “something”. The efforts to describe the “given” without established categories and concepts lead, as Wittgenstein sarcastically remarks, to an unintelligible grunt: “So in the end when one is doing philosophy one gets to the point where one would like just to emit an inarticulate sound” (1967: § 261)¹⁴.

I take this “argument from the indispensable background”, as I would like to call it, to be the point of philosophies so different as Kant and post-Kantian Idealism, but also Wittgenstein, Phenomenology, Hermeneutics and of course Pragmatism. They differ in how they articulate the background – it can be purely transcendental, or subjective and mental, or linguistic and collective. They also differ in how far they advance antifoundationalism¹⁵. The decisive factor is that they all oppose the “mythical” idea that experience acts as an unjustified justifier, as a grounding *given* which would bypass the self-critical reflexivity of reason.

If this reconstruction is right, then we can see that the two basic motives of antifoundationalism are not of equal weight. Here we come back to the tension introduced in the previous section. The first, scientific element of *antifoundationalism* tries to isolate science as an outstanding form of inquiry. It attributes science’s success to some characteristic trait which will distinguish science from other forms of reflection. Good candidates are here, for example, mathematical analysis, formal reasoning or the experimental method. But the second pillar of antifoundationalism, the criterion of rationality, is perfectly general. It applies to *all* forms of understanding and is not restricted to science in any way. In consequence, an *antifoundationalism* which focuses on this second dimension will tend to move away from the concrete scientific practices. It will reflect on more general questions of understanding, meaning and rationality.

The tension, then, is simply this: Science is a *particular* practice, established in the course of a long and complex history; whereas theories of meaning, rationality and understanding give a *general* account which ignores science’s concrete form and history. The challenge now is to develop an *antifoundationalism* which presents such a general account *without* ignoring the particularities of science. The tension must not be eliminated. What we want is to understand how science can be so impressively effective in comparison with other practices of inquiry, and still leave room for the *antifoundationalist* idea that this success cannot be detached from rational criticism and reflexive scrutiny.

We can, of course, emancipate our reflection from the first premise and disagree with the modern idea that science is something special. Such a position takes critical

14. The parallel between Wittgenstein’s private-language argument and the critique of the given is pointed out by McDowell (1996: 18-23).

15. Wittgenstein’s *On Certainty* (1969), for example, argues against the possibility of a transparently *rational* correction of all knowledge.

rationality to be a general human capacity without any constitutive link to science. But even such a position has to explain why certain kinds of knowledge and reflection – call them “empirical” – have turned out to be so much more effective than other ways. It cannot turn its back on the specific *performance* of knowledge, as Barry Allen (2004) calls it. A modern philosophy which embraces the transcendental standpoint and yet does not show any interest in that special performance cannot be called *antifoundationalism* any more – it loses track of any specific *problem* of knowledge. I will not argue here against such a position. But I think that most philosophers in discussion here, from Kant to Logical Empiricism to post-analytic philosophy, were still interested in retaining that distinction – with the exception of Rorty, that is.

For the same reason, we must not *conflate* these ideas. Scientific thinking in its modern form is more than critical thinking; minimally, it is a very special form of criticism. One good indication that there is something special to science is the fact that the practice of empirical research and testing (as well, we might even argue, the practices of mathematics) had to be *discovered*. This historical dimension can of course be circumvented by telling the old enlightenment narrative that the rise of modern science had been delayed, and even retarded, by the irrational forces of history and religion. But this story is untenable. It paints a much too partial and one-sided picture of *both* enlightenment and other epochs. It also plays in the hands of the myth of the given, since it suggests that experience’s lessons have been always already out there, and they have just not been heeded. The emergence of ‘human reason’ alone, whatever such an isolated capacity is supposed to be, simply is not a sufficient cause to establish a “rational” preference for empirical sciences. Modern science is more than just reason finding itself.

The most convincing argument for an essential tension between the twin values of science and rationality, though, comes from the side of rationality. If we reduce *antifoundationalism* to the claim that all criticism is scientific, we have no tools left in order to criticize science’s self-understanding. We scientize thinking. In taking a contingently given historical practice to represent the full scope and range of rationality *per se*, such a position gives up *antifoundationalism*. It collapses into positivism by reducing all rationality to what is presently taken to be “scientific thinking”, the result of which is, paradoxically, that the very possibility of scientific *progress* is denied. Criticism is an essential part of science’s own self-reflection. The *historical* dimension of scientific methods and practices, the fact that sciences critically reflect on their own paradigms and presuppositions, contributes essentially to the persuasive power of antifoundationalism. If we want to defend the possibility of such a historical progression, we have to allow for an uneasy tension between science and rationality.

5. *Osing Sight of Science*

The preceding sections have revised the received view of *antifoundationalism*. There is a widespread perception, partly due to Rorty’s influence, that associates antifoundationalism with a linguistically oriented style of philosophizing. A closer inspection of the history of antifoundationalism and analytic philosophy has shown

that this narrative is at least deceptive. In strongly connecting empiricism and foundationalism, it creates the false impression that the notion of “experience” stands in the way of every decent understanding of *antifoundationalism*.

It has been further suggested that the dichotomy between “language” and “experience” should be understood as the expression of a deeper polarity within modern antifoundationalist thinking. We have identified two constitutive requirements of *antifoundationalism*: A strong belief in science, on the one hand, and an equally strong adherence to the transcendental principle of rationality and critical self-reflection, on the other hand. According to that scheme, the post-analytic insistence on the ubiquity of language and conceptual rationality is actually a variation of the Kantian and post-Kantian argument for an indispensable background of understanding. Every “given” bit of experience is always already linked to us and our language. The crucial point is that in determining experience, that background is also providing a structure for critical reflection. Any antifoundationalist philosophy has to allow for such a critical space if it wants to defend the principled revisability of all claims.

This way of formulating the matter allows us to put the post-analytic critique of experience in a different light. We have seen that there is a certain tension between the two constitutive elements of antifoundationalist thinking: The faith in science requires that we specify what makes science so special; the defense of critical rationality forces the antifoundationalist to look beyond science’s particularities. Traditional empiricism took “experience” to be science’s distinguishing mark. Consequently, the post-analytic criticism of “experience” created an explanatory gap: How can you explain what makes science so special, if it is not seen any more as the best way to organize “experience”¹⁶?

In attacking experience, post-analytic antifoundationalism was attacking an obvious explanation for the specific *effectiveness* of science. The problem, then, is to find a substitute candidate for that functional role. A good candidate is the notion of *objectivity*. In scientific debates, the term stands, as the historians of science Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison (1992, and 2007) point out, primarily for that which escapes the distorting influences of subjectivity. They call objectivity an “epistemic virtue”: According to their reconstruction, being true to the facts is associated with the sometimes life-long task of taking an objective, universal stance towards the world, a task permanently threatened by subjective idiosyncrasies and particularities. It is no surprise, then, that objectivity has become such a central and recurring topic within post-analytic philosophy of language. The notion is treated as an indicator for the *true* encounter with reality. It promises to capture science’s essential ingredient while keeping philosophy away from the problems associated with the idea of “experience”.

If we follow the trajectory suggested by Rorty – from Quine and Sellars to Davidson and finally Rorty himself – the vacancy caused by the dismissal of experience had not

16. Godfrey-Smith (2003: 8-13) distinguishes three general types of answer which have been given to the question how science works: Experience, mathematics and social structure. But mathematics and social organization do not oppose the basic empiricist belief that only experience provides us with real knowledge; they just add further layers of explanation in specifying why the *scientific* way to treat experience is extra-ordinary.

been successfully filled. Philosophy of language shifted more and more towards the transcendental side of antifoundationalism, occupying itself with general questions of meaning, understanding and rationality. As a result, “science” is seen as just a very efficient realization of a general human ability to reason. A perfect expression of this post-analytic shift is Sellars’s dictum that “empirical knowledge, like its sophisticated extension, science, is rational, not because it has a *foundation* but because it is a self-correcting enterprise which can put *any* claim in jeopardy, though not *all* at once” (Sellars 1997: 79). Science and rationality are set on a par. They are treated like equivalent expressions of the same universal self-critical capacity, which in turn is identified with rationality as such.

One of the pivotal figures in that discussion is, again, Rorty. He saw the functional link between the notion of “objectivity” and classical empiricism. In his drive to sever all connections with the traditional epistemological discourse, he tried to avoid even *that* weak substitute for foundationalism. He completely discarded the traditional modern epistemological narrative. In proposing to substitute “objectivity” with “solidarity”, he explicitly denied that scientific practices embody an ultimately privileged access to the world. To most fellow *antifoundationalists*, though, this was one move too much. They try to “rehabilitate objectivity”, as McDowell (2000) calls it, and insist that there’s more to objectivity than communal agreement.

I will leave it open whether post-analytic philosophy has any success with the rehabilitation of objectivity¹⁷. My problem here is that this discussion has drifted away from any concrete consideration of science and its practice. Even worse, the term “objectivity” is following in the footsteps of empiricism while obliterating its empiricist provenance. It is now supposed to do the work which had traditionally been delegated to “experience”: to save knowledge from relativism and conventionalism, to *bind* it to reality. But in treating the term in this abstract way, it becomes an empty article of faith. A sign that there is a central confusion at work here is the never-ending discussion about epistemological skepticism (see Pinkard 1999; Cavell 1979). Against the skeptical threat, objectivity is defended as a regulative dimension of all intelligent inquiry (Misak 2004), or as an intrinsic feature of conceptual understanding (Davidson 2009a). It is taken to be a “perspectival form” (Brandom 1994: 600) underlying every rational claim, or to express the transcendental point that the “world is embraceable in thought” (McDowell 1996: 33)¹⁸.

It would be a mistake to call these accounts to “tell the skeptic to get lost” (Davidson 2009a: 157) *wrong*. But in focusing exclusively on “objectivity” and general forms of understanding, they are merely one-sided. They overgeneralize science’s universal aspirations. Cheryl Misak, for example, describes what she understands to be the “more objective kind of pragmatism” as one which is “committed to the objective dimension of human inquiry – to the fact that those engaged in deliberation and investigation take themselves to be aiming at getting things right, avoiding mistakes, and improving their beliefs and theories” (2013: 3). Such an engagement, though, is

17. For a good detailed discussion of the case of Brandom, see Levine 2012.

18. My reconstruction of post-analytic philosophy owes much to McDowell 1996, without accepting his Kantian position which more or less ignores the challenge of the “negativity” of experience.

neither ubiquitous nor universal. Rorty is right in pointing out how overly-confined the typical epistemological discourse is when it comes to locating the debate about objectivity, and correctly asserts that there are many more forms of intelligent inquiry than the scientific one. Take the arts, for example, or philosophy, which both have a rather loose relationship to empirical evidence and testing. Or take serious political debates, which can deepen our understanding of a subject without exactly *settling* it. All of these human practices aim “at getting things right, avoiding mistakes and improving their beliefs” (Misak 2013: 3). Such a perfectionism is of obvious significance in morality; it is not far to seek in the arts; it is hopefully driving lots of debates within philosophy. What is different, though, is that they do not aim at *theories*, or at *empirical knowledge*. They communicate in different ways, by different means. Their claims are not related to reality in the same way that an “objective” assertion or theory is, and they are not backed by the same sort of conclusiveness. This *variety* of intelligence forms an indispensable part of the fabric of human life, and by focusing solely on “objectivity” and other post-empiricist substitutes for “experience”, such variety is willfully excluded.

6. *The Experiment as Paradigm for Reflection*

The problem with much of post-analytic philosophy of language, as well as with certain readings of classical pragmatism, is a *too narrow* understanding of antifoundationalism. It is restricted to an idealized (and yet always implicitly scientifically biased) account of understanding and meaning. A wider conception should rather use science’s success as an opportunity to articulate the *different forms* of contact with experience. The dividing line, then, does not run between the defenders of “language” or “experience”. It is rather separating authors who treat rationality as the hallmark of modern scientific thinking and those who criticize a too exclusively epistemological focus on knowledge and objectivity.

Classical pragmatism establishes such a wider perspective. It shares the post-analytical skepticism towards a foundationalist empiricism, and it is equally critical of the functional role assigned to experience (as a decontextualized “given”) within the empiricist and positivist tradition. But instead of *dropping* the empiricist’s reference to experience, it consciously *reconstructs* it (see Dewey 1982). In the scheme devised above: Classical pragmatism *retains* the idea that there is something special showing up in scientific practices, something that explains its effectiveness. In that respect, the traditional empiricist notion of “experience” was a good first shot. But empiricism was wrong to conceive of it as something which mediates between mind and world. It succumbed to the traditionally contemplative position towards knowledge in which exploring the world consists solely in *looking*. Rather, “experience” should be seen as a reflective activity, for which the scientific *experiment* provides an apt paradigm¹⁹.

19. Misak has an eye on experimentalism and discusses, for example, the unintuitive pragmatist claim that even pure mathematics can be seen as experiments “in diagrammatic contexts” (2013: 42). Allen (2004: 52-59) emphasizes that Peirce took the experiment to be a *discovery* in the practical field of knowledge which previous empiricists had not recognized. Allen’s “Dyonesian Epistemology” (Chapter

For classical pragmatism, experimentation is *the* outstanding trait which helps to explain science’s particular effectiveness. “Experimentalism is the cause of the victories won by science”, Dewey asserts (1986: 67). The experiment serves as a model for the reconstruction of experience. Peirce introduces pragmatism as the philosophy of an experimentalist’s mind (1998: 331-345). Dewey publishes *Essays in Experimental Logic* and looks back at the history of pragmatism as a tradition “known under the names of Pragmatism, Instrumentalism, Experimentalism” (1984: 3). Among the classical figures, William James seems to be the most detached from any concrete reference to the experiment. An experimental scientist by training, his writings focus more on the existential morals of experimentalism’s fallible logic. We are “living on things *in posse*”, he claims, on “drafts” or “speculative investments” (1987: 1181). I take James’s “radical empiricism” to be largely compatible with many points we will discuss now; but the following exposition of the experiment draws more on Peirce and Dewey than on James.

Why is the experiment such an apt replacement for the traditional notion of experience? First of all: Because it allows us to defend the empiricist intuition that in good knowledge, “experience” carries the main burden of work, while at the same time allowing us to honor the main tenets of *antifoundationalism*. If we look at the experiment as the fundamental unit of experience, we avoid any reference to a mythical given. Scientific practitioners do not just “have” experiences and then reflect on them. They rather conduct complex and reflected activities, in the course of which experience interferes. Seen from the perspective of experimental practice, experiences are never isolated “given” cognitions, but rather form a dynamic flow with both obstacles and reinforcing effects. This is possible because all perception within an experimental setting is, to pick up Sellars’s phrase, “fraught with ought”: The experiential flow is perceived *in relation* to the experimentalist’s expectations and conceptions, giving it significance beyond the immediate moment.

The second reason to turn to the experiment as a paradigm for experiencing is that it highlights the *active* character of experience. It is often stated that experience, for pragmatism, is in principle recalcitrant, defiant, obstinate. As Peirce prominently puts it: inquiry is the “struggle to attain a state of belief” (1992: 114). But what is often overlooked in this description is its *positive* character. Experience does not remain passive; it exerts *force* upon the experimenter. When Peirce is talking about a “struggle”, he is not just pointing to a series of disappointments. Experimentation is also positively driven by ideas and hypotheses which remain sensitive to the ensuing course of events.

This active dimension of experience is already discernible in its beginning. The experience of doubt which initiates the experiment is not, as it were, without direction. Peirce states that in an experiment, there is always a verifiable hypothesis, and the experimenter has to entertain “sincere doubt...as to the truth of *that* hypothesis” (1998: 339, *emphasis added*). Dewey pronounces a similar point when he claims that

3) also suggests that one cultural condition of experimentalism is a certain material *abundance* and luxury, which made experimental creativity possible by providing the necessary background stability.

“a problem must be felt before it can be stated”. A vague impression already contributes to the necessary “selection and the weighing of observed facts and their conceptual ordering” (2008: 76). The initial doubt of inquiry is not sweeping skepticism, but directed distrust. As such, it shows how experience can be more than just a passive impression constraining our choices from without. It is fallibly indicating the possible relevance of the ensuing inquiry, urging where to look for and what to count as evidence. When inquiry begins, the subject is already *taken in* by experience. Dewey is right in insisting that this is a *logical* condition of experimental conduct, and not a contingent psychological fact: there has to be *some* background condition which determines what is relevant and what can be ignored.

The third significant contribution of the experiment to *antifoundationalism* is that it represents a solid paradigm for a strong understanding of rationality. The experiment is a controlled setting to cause unforeseen reactions. But since these reactions have been caused at will, they can be traced back to their conditions and their guiding principles. Peirce calls the experiment “an operation of thought” (1998: 337). What qualifies this judgment for Peirce is that thinking is primarily a matter of “self-control”, meaning that it is a normative affair: we can exercise *good* or *bad* judgments; *right* or *incorrect* ones. In consequence, we can criticize bad thinking (and action) and strive to better our judgments by reflecting on their causes. The experiment delimits a sphere within which we can actively exercise, train and ideally improve this self-control.

The self-enclosed structure of experimental reflexivity mirrors Kant’s autonomy of reason, which we have discussed in sec.4. The experiment is integrating the unforeseen consequences into the experimental setting by transforming them to *known* causes (cf. Dewey 1981: 277). This can be seen as a process of eliminating the need for an “external” foundation of our understanding. The ideal experiment ceases to be experimentation and becomes a fully autonomous, yet empirically contentful understanding. The experiment thus represents a cornerstone of modern antifoundationalism – with the difference that it conceives reason not as a given (transcendental) structure, but as a controlled material²⁰ space in which autonomous understanding will establish itself by and by.

There is a fourth antifoundationalist lesson to be learned by the experiment: It is a *method* which stays away from any substantial ontological or metaphysical commitments. Or, at least, this is by all means how the classical pragmatists see it. Peirce calls the experimentalist “color-blind” to the deeper ontological meaning of her actions. In other words: “nothing that might not result from experiment can have any direct bearing upon conduct” (1998: 332). Nothing is hidden, everything is open to experimental investigation. If this idea can be defended, we have *antifoundationalism* in the extreme: as a *method*, the experiment is free to examine anything which purports meaning, including its own particular tools and operations.

This final aspect contributes in particular to the distinctive shape of experiential antifoundationalism. It allows experimentalism to integrate *itself* reflexively

20. The sign is, of course, above all a *material* thing. Dewey extends the material dimension to “[p]endulums, lenses, prisms, yard sticks, and pound weights and multiplication and logarithmic tables” (Dewey 1981: 261).

into the wider historical and philosophical scheme. From the point of view of the experiment, the practice of experimentation is, of course, itself a historical *discovery*. By establishing a significantly different way to relate to experience sometime in the 16th or 17th century, it launched the unparalleled success of empirical sciences. It represents a new “art of knowledge” (Allen). But this art did not come into being by sovereign rational reflection, nor does it express a deeper metaphysical commitment. It is the refinement of something like a form of proto-experimentation which did not yet develop a clear consciousness of its own methods. Once this discovery has been made, we can accept its normative lesson – that all meaning and knowledge is an “experimental phenomenon” (Peirce) – and constantly reapply it. Even though the experiment is a particular practice, it *teaches* us something about the way we think in general. In a very pragmatist spirit, then, the rise of the experiment can be understood as an unintended consequence which retrospectively sheds light on what had been previously a groping in the dark.

If we focus on these four aspects of the experiment, we are in a position to sum up the particularity of pragmatism’s *experiential* approach to antifoundationalism. It accepts that there is no such thing as an immediately given in experience; and it adopts the modern confidence in reason and its critical powers. But it sees *reason itself*, paradigmatically represented by the experimental activity, as being triggered, driven and of course checked by experience. Reason, intelligent reflection, is not a plain actualization of a given human capacity. It is a response to an underdetermined situation; a reaction to a lack of orientation. This is what the experiment, as a practice, manifests on a small scale. On an historical scale, the same lesson can be drawn from the fact that scientific experimentation had first to be *found* and *established* in order to unfold these impressive powers of reasoning.

In that sense, the most succinct definition of this kind of philosophy is that it conceives antifoundationalism as the *core* of all rational reflection. Antifoundationalism, in that view, is not a necessary correction to an otherwise stable structure of empirically oriented rationality. Rather, for pragmatism antifoundationalism embodies the *very essence* of what it means to relate to experience. “Experience”, James writes, “merely as such doesn’t come ticketed and labeled, we have first to discover what it is” (1987: 561). This *process of discovery* is what antifoundationalism is about. For experiential pragmatism, the task is to center our self-understanding around *that activity to understand what is given*. Nothing is plainly given, everything has to be *worked with* in order to understand it (Garrison 1995). Dewey gives this attitude a very vivid and fitting description: “the immediately given is always the dubious; it is always a matter for subsequent events to determine, or assign character to. It is a cry for something not given, a request addressed to fortune, with the pathos of a plea or the imperiousness of a command” (1981: 262).

7. Conclusion

We have now come full circle. Our investigation began by embracing *antifoundationalism* as a good and powerful argument against the notion of “experience”, so strong that post-analytic philosophy of language aspired to discard this term completely. This seemed to endanger experiential pragmatism. But the whole situation turned out to be a misunderstanding. The founding figures of pragmatism were not only consciously avoiding any “mythical” reference to an experiential given. The idea of restricting antifoundationalism to a language-centered philosophy proved to be historically and systematically wrong. There are, and there have been, other valid forms of antifoundationalist thinking which are not part of philosophy of language. Experiential pragmatism is ready to join the antifoundationalist ranks again.

Going back to Kant, we turned to the roots of modern antifoundationalism, and we found a strong belief in empirical science and an equally strong conviction in the critical power of rationality. In that perspective, pragmatism turns out to be *another* articulation of modern antifoundationalist thinking. One which, it is claimed, serves antifoundationalist ends better than contemporary analytic philosophy of language. In taking the *experiment* as the paradigm for experience, it remains closer to the particular historic success of the empirical sciences that gave rise to antifoundationalism in the first place. Pragmatism can explain this success as a consequence of the specific practical *form* of scientific inquiry – one that has become synonymous with inquiry *tout court* within pragmatist circles. That practical form is, however, not imposed upon the world by a rationally engineering mind. For experiential pragmatism, it is itself a product of experience. Pragmatism’s variant of antifoundationalism, thus turns out to be *reflexivity all the way down*: It is not only avoiding the epistemological myth of the given, but also avoiding any transcendental reification of our intellectual powers²¹.

In concentrating on the *organizational form* of our intelligent practices, this pragmatist approach further allows us to plunge into the wide variety of human practices (and experiences). This variety can be explored, as it were, from within. We can leave the discussion behind how “world and mind...are transcendently made for each other” (McDowell 1996: 159). From within lived experience, it is possible to discern a wide variety of ways to be “minded”. Science, or scientific thinking, is one of them. It is outstanding and, in certain respects, unrivaled; but it is not all there is to rationality and experience. In keeping an eye on these differences, experiential pragmatism seems to be better guarded against the danger of an uncritical and unreflective thinking which confuses a scientific *ideal* of rationality and criticism with its very essence.

Looking at antifoundationalism in that perspective, then, allows us to offer yet another re-description of its motivation. Modern science has challenged and perhaps at times even threatened our self-understanding as rational being. It has shown that it is not thinking alone which helps us to come to grips with the world. (That is, if we take thinking to be a somewhat non-empirical affair). This challenge is not exclusively

21. This historical description is better suited to Dewey’s philosophy than to Peirce or James, but I take it to be the overall perspective which allows to grasp the essence of experiential pragmatism.

modern. In a way, we can already draw a similar line between Plato, the idealist, and Aristotle, the empiricist. But it is distinctively modern in that it forces us to take thinking, rationality and understanding to be essentially *interwoven* with the world. This is actually also the lesson of the late-twentieth century post-analytic philosophy which tried to shake off skeptical worries about an imperfect access to reality (Davidson, Brandom and McDowell). But it is better articulated in an *experiential* antifoundationalism. This view takes the critical power of reasoning not to be identical with “rationality” as such, but sees it rather as an historical practical accomplishment which has to be appropriated, defended and re-established over and over again²².

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